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Beyond Religious Narcissistic Identification: Agnostic and Atheistic Narcissism

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to report.

Data Availability Statement

Data, codes, and the research protocol (Supplementary Online Materials) are available at https://osf.io/n2s4q/?view_only=867d8b49656747f4aa8d0da6ef2d00de. The English versions of instruments are provided in Supplementary Online Materials, and national versions of scales are available on the project website: https://www.crossculturalpsychlab.com/methods.

Abstract

Agnosticism and atheism are often grouped simply as nonreligious identities, yet emerging research highlights their distinct psychological profiles and social implications. Among these distinctions, collective narcissism—characterized by strong attachment to one's group, exceptionalism, and grievance for recognition—offers a framework for understanding identity processes in both nonreligious groups. We examined whether agnostics and atheists exhibit collective narcissism and its forms (agentic—focused on exceptional effectiveness; communal—focused on exceptional morality) similarly to believers. We explored cross-denominational variance in agentic and communal collective narcissism levels relying on data from 77 countries (N = 3,570; 1227 agnostics, 2343 atheists). Agnostics and atheists from secular countries reported lower collective (particularly agentic) narcissism relative to their counterparts from religious countries. Further, agnostics and atheists were higher on communal than agentic collective narcissism. The results highlight the utility of the agency-communion model of collective narcissism among non-believers.

Keywords: collective narcissism, agnosticism, atheism, agency, communion

Beyond Religious Narcissistic Identification: Agnostic and Atheistic Narcissism

Religiosity plays a central role in shaping individual identity, offering both a framework for interpreting the world and a basis for group belonging (Collins, 2001; Smith, 2001). Defined as "beliefs and practices referring to a transcendent being and legitimized through an established tradition or group" (Saroglou, 2010, p. 109), religiosity functions not only as a system of metaphysical beliefs but also as a social identity. Religious identity, in this sense, is fundamentally relational: it is shaped through affiliation with a specific group or denomination that shares a religious worldview (Collins, 2001).

However, many individuals across various societies do not identify as religious. These individuals are often categorized monolithically as "non-believers," a label that obscures psychological and ideological distinctions. Traditionally, psychological research on religiosity has focused on the experiences and characteristics of believers, paying limited attention to diversity among the non-religious (Remizova et al., 2024). Recent developments have begun to challenge this oversight by distinguishing between two major subgroups of non-believers: agnostics and atheists (Karim & Saroglou, 2023, 2025a). Atheists are typically understood as those who reject belief in any deity or supernatural agent, whereas agnostics maintain a more epistemically cautious position, claiming that the existence of a god or higher power is unknowable (Lindeman et al., 2020). Agnostic and atheist identities are more than positions on metaphysical questions. Rather, they function as social identities, shaping how individuals see themselves in relation to others. Similar to religious affiliation, they can serve as sources of pride, defensiveness, and intergroup differentiation (Karim & Saroglou, 2023). This possibility raises questions about how non-believing identities are expressed, defended, and experienced across cultural setting.

Just as religious identification can offer a source of belonging, meaning, and group affiliation, so too can non-believing identities like agnosticism and atheism. These belief-based positions function not merely as private worldviews but as social identities, particularly in societies where religion remains culturally central or contested. Similar to any group identity, non-belief can elicit forms of ingroup attachment that vary in their psychological security. When individuals perceive their identity group to be underappreciated, marginalized,

or misrepresented, they may respond with defensive overidentification (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Guerra et al., 2025). In such cases, group membership may become a basis not only for solidarity, but also for psychological compensation and status assertion (Mackey et al., 2020) or through offering a sense of epistemic closure (Hogg, 2007). This insecure ingroup attachment is captured by collective narcissism, defined as group-based self-aggrandizement paired with resentment towards outgroups (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009, 2020).

Collective narcissism has been linked to intergroup prejudice, support for aggression, conspiracy thinking, and populism (Golec de Zavala, 2024; Golec de Zavala & Lantos, 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2017). Although this construct has been primarily studied in relation to national and religious identities (Guerra et al., 2022; Marchlewska et al., 2019; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021, 2025), it might plausibly apply to secular identities as well. Given that agnosticism and atheism can serve as worldviews and group identities, they too may be vulnerable to narcissistic expressions, especially in contexts where non-belief is marginalized or under threat. However, only limited research has addressed agnostic or atheistic collective narcissism, and so it remains unclear whether such identities operate similarly to religious or national ones. One recent study included non-believers in global analyses of religious-based narcissism in Poland (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2025), but systematic inquiry into atheistic or agnostic narcissism is still in its infancy.

A further layer of complexity involves the content of narcissistic self-views. Drawing on the agency–communion model of grandiose narcissism (Gebauer & Sedikides, 2018; Gebauer et al., 2012; see also Nehrlich et al., 2019), narcissistic enhancement can be grounded in either agentic traits (e.g., competence, intelligence, assertiveness) or communal traits (e.g., morality, warmth, helpfulness), a patten observable in collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, 2024; Sedikides, 2021; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021). Agentic collective narcissists assert their group's superiority through claims of competence or power and often endorse aggressive or exclusionary attitudes towards outgroups. They are more likely to support military solutions, reject prosocial obligations, and endorse conspiracy beliefs (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021, 2024). In contrast, communal collective narcissists emphasize their group's moral standing and prosocial values. They may appear more trusting

and helpful, especially toward non-threatening others, though this prosociality is often conditional (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021, 2022, 2024). Evidence indicates that atheists mostly self-enhance through agentic traits. For example, in a Christian-majority UK sample, atheists viewed themselves as more intelligent than others, whereas agnostics viewed themselves (and others) as nice (Karim & Saroglou, 2025b). Also, atheists reported higher levels of dogmatism and analytical thinking, whereas agnostics, compared to both atheists and religious participants, reported higher levels of prosociality, neuroticism, and openness to change (Karim & Saroglou, 2023). In all, agnostics and atheists may engage in different forms of self- and group-enhancement: atheists through agency, agnostics, if at all, through communion.

Self-enhancement motivation and collective identity expressions are shaped by cultural context. One key moderator is country-level religiosity. According to the Religiosity-as-Social-Value hypothesis, the centrality of religious belief is contingent on societal norms: in highly religious societies, religion is a dominant cultural value, whereas, in more secular societies, non-belief may be more socially acceptable or even advantageous (Gebauer & Sedikides, 2021; Gebauer et al., 2017). Empirical evidence is consistent with this hypothesis. In more religious countries, agnostics outnumber atheists, suggesting that a relatively cautious or ambiguous stance toward religion is socially safer; in contrast, atheists are more prevalent in secular countries (Karim & Saroglou, 2025a). In highly religious contexts, agnostic and atheistic identities may be experienced as socially threatened, increasing the likelihood of insecure, narcissistic attachment to non-believing ingroups.

Another critical factor is religious denomination or tradition. In Dharmic traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, non-theistic perspectives have long been accommodated. Classical schools like Cārvāka and Sāṃkhya in Hinduism, and early Buddhist teachings, do not require belief in a personal god (Bodhi, 2005; Rukmani, 2017). In contrast, in Abrahamic traditions, such as Christianity or Islam, atheism is more often framed as rejection or deviance from a moral-theistic order, sometimes resulting in greater social stigma or alienation (Altman, 2017; LeDrew, 2015; van der Veer, 2001). Thus, the implications of self-identifying

as agnostic or atheist may differ substantially across cultures both in terms of personal meaning and the degree of social defensiveness or ingroup investment they entail.

Previous research has demonstrated that religious-based narcissism is conceptually and empirically distinct from national narcissism (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2020, 2025) in both Christian (Marchlewska et al., 2019; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2025) and Muslim (Stopka et al., 2025) populations. Only one known study has included agnostics and atheists in global assessments of religious-based collective narcissism (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2025), and none have examined how narcissistic identification differs between these groups. Moreover, although individual-level data suggest distinct self-views among agnostics and atheists (Karim & Saroglou, 2023, 2025b), it is unclear whether these distinctions extend to group-level narcissism.

Finally, most of the relevant literature is based on Western and largely Abrahamic samples. There is little evidence on how agnostic or atheistic identities function in non-Western or polytheistic contexts, where the religious landscape is less institutionalized or dogmatic (e.g., Hinduism, Shintoism). It remains to be seen whether non-belief in such contexts elicits the defensive group enhancement observed in more rigidly theistic cultures.

In this study, we posed two questions. First, can agnostic and atheistic collective narcissism be meaningfully studied across countries with varying religious heritage, including those where non-believers are the largest group? Second, does the agency–communion model of collective narcissism apply to non-believing identities, or are atheistic and agnostic narcissism different from (already studied) religious-based collective narcissism?

To address these questions, we drew on cross-cultural data from 77 countries of religious heritage representing all major world religions, as well as secular societies. (In the secular societies, non-believers constituted the most numerous groups as compared to the group representing any specific religion.) We assessed the extent to which agnostic and atheistic collective narcissism can be distinguished and meaningfully interpreted across countries with a shared religious heritage, and whether narcissistic identification with own group differs in terms of their agentic or communal orientation. We address the first question by testing measurement models for the scales originally employed to study collective

narcissism for national and religious identity (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Marchlewska et al., 2019; Stopka et al., 2025; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021, 2025), which we modified to measure agnostic and atheistic collective narcissism.

To explore possible cross-denominational differences we needed to establish measurement invariance (Davidov et al., 2015; Meredith, 1993), allowing us to compare the scores across groups in a reliable manner. If succeeded, we would aim to compare the means of agentic collective narcissism and communal collective narcissism across agnostics and atheists originating from countries with different religious heritage, including secular ones.

We expected that agnostic and atheistic global collective narcissism would be similar to religious one (i.e., we could apply measurement instruments from religious collective narcissism to non-believers), and (2) agentic and communal collective narcissism would not overlap, similar to a pattern observed in research on religious collective narcissism (Stopka et al., 2024; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2025). Further, we expected that the level of defensive identity (i.e., global collective narcissism) would be lower among agnostics and atheists from secular countries as compared to other religious zones, given that agnostics and atheists are more accepted in secular countries (Gebauer et al., 2017; Karim & Saroglou, 2025a). Lastly, we expected that the communal domain would be more important for agnostics than for atheists, whereas the agentic domain would be more important for atheists than agnostics, mirroring patterns observed in individual self-enhancement (Karim & Saroglou, 2023b). Additionally, we explored gender differences in collective narcissism. Although prior research suggests no reliable gender differences in national collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, 2024), women are generally more likely than men to affiliate with a religion (Hackett et al., 2016).

Method

Sample and Procedure

The data were collected between April 2023 and June 2024 through the Ariadna online panel (www.Ariadna.pl) via separate link for each language version, as a part of broader project [MASKED]. The study was approved by the Ethical review board of the first author's institution. We recruited participants by leveraging the network of our collaborators at their

local universities. We deemed data usable, if participants (1) were over the age of 18, (2) responded to at least one of the scales measuring collective narcissism, and (3) passed all three randomly placed attention-checks (e.g., "This item aims to check your attention. Please mark 2").

The final sample included 3,570 (out of 15,636 who provided information on religious affiliation) non-believers from 77 countries, with 63.25% being female, a mean age of 23.99 years (SD = 8.54 years), and a mean self-reported economic status of 4.43 (SD = 1.15). We measured economic status with the question: "How would you describe the economic status of your family on a scale from 1 to 7" (1 = *much lower than average*, 7 = *much higher than average*). Of participants, 2,343 self-identified as atheists (65.66% women; M_{age} = 24.24 years; SD_{age} = 8.41 years) and 1,227 self-identified as agnostics (58.93% women; M_{age} = 23.83 years, SD_{age} = 8.77 years).

Measures

We assessed narcissistic identification with non-believers using two validated instruments: (1) the 8-item Collective Narcissism Scale (CNS; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; e.g., "My group deserves special treatment"), which captures agentic collective narcissism, and (2) the 7-item Communal Collective Narcissism Inventory (CCNI; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021b; e.g., "People of my group are the most helpful people I know"), which captures communal collective narcissism. Consistent with the procedure outlined in Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al. (2021a), we excluded one item from the original CNS (i.e., "If my group had more to say, the world would be a better place") due to its lower factor loading in prior studies.

To ensure conceptual relevance and participant identification, we adapted all items to reflect participants' identification with an ingroup sharing the same religious worldview. Specifically, atheists responded to items referring to the group "atheists," whereas agnostics responded to items referencing the group "agnostics." Each participant received a version of the scales tailored to their previously mentioned religious affiliation, where they could select "agnostic" or "atheist" among other options. We recorded responses on both scales on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. We report descriptive statistics and reliability

coefficients for both measures in Tables 1A and 1B. Data and codes are available at https://osf.io/n2s4q/?view_only=867d8b49656747f4aa8d0da6ef2d00de. We provide the research protocol in Supplementary Online Materials.

Analytical Strategy

We grouped agnostics and atheists based on the dominant religion of their country (Supplementary Online Materials), that is, Buddhism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism (Statista, 2021). We labeled as secular the countries in which the numbers of non-believers prevailed. Further, we subdivided countries of Christian heritage into three branches (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism), because of the overrepresentation of such countries in our sample. We classified participants into different religious groups based on their nationality, as their individual religiosity might be shaped by country-level religiosity. Thus, when we refer to Christian or Muslim countries, we refer to countries of specific religious heritage. For example, we classified agnostics or atheists from India as belonging to countries of Hindu heritage, referred to as originating from Hinduist countries (Supplementary Online Materials, p. 6). Next, we conducted single-group Confirmatory Factor Analyses to test whether the measures provided structurally valid data. Moreover, to establish measurement invariance, we carried out Multigroup Confirmatory Factor Analyses (Supplementary Online Materials, Tables S5-S12). Measurement invariance informed us about comparability of the scales and, by it, the constructs assessed by the instruments. Configural invariance denotes that the constructs are assessed by the same items and with the same number of factors, metric invariance allows us to compare correlates of the phenomenon across groups, and scalar invariance allows for reliable comparison between latent scores across groups (Meredith, 1993).

In all analyses, we employed R software, with the “dplyr” package for data manipulation, the “lavaan” package for factor analyses, and the “lme4” package for multilevel modeling analyses. In factor analyses, we used the Robust Maximum Likelihood estimator to account for deviations from normality (Yuan & Bentler, 2000) and relied on the following thresholds of fit indices: CFI > .90, RMSEA < .08, SRMR < .08 (Brown, 2015; Byrne, 1994).

In the cross-cultural Multigroup Confirmatory Factor Analysis, we adopted the following thresholds to test metric invariance: ΔCFI < -.01, ΔRMSEA < .015 (Chen, 2007).

Results

Agnostic Narcissism: Measurement Models

We present the results of single-group Confirmatory Factor Analysis for agentic agnostic narcissism in Table 2 and for communal agnostic narcissism in Table 3. The number of agnostics was low (n < 100) in the countries of secular, Buddhist, Islamic, and Jewish heritage. Accordingly, findings from these groups should be interpreted with caution due to reduced statistical power and potential instability in parameter estimates. There were only seven agnostics in the Hinduist countries, therefore we removed them from further analyses.

In all these groups, except for agnostics from secular countries, model fit for agentic agnostic narcissism was poor and required modifications (see Table S1 for unmodified models). Given that RMSEA is sensitive to sample size (Chen et al., 2008), we relied on CFI (as > .90) and SRMR (< .08). To improve model fit, we removed item 2 (“Agnostics deserve special treatment”) and item 6 (“I do not get upset when people do not notice achievements of people with agnostic worldview”). Item 2 measures narcissistic entitlement, which could be sensitive to cultural context, as it is the case for individual narcissism (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2019). Item 6 is the only reverse-scored one. Prior studies on national narcissism indicated problems with low factor loading of this item (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021a, 2024). Hence, in all groups, the modified measurement model fitted well to the data.

The model fit for communal agnostic narcissism was acceptable for all of the compared groups. However, in most models, we needed to provide additional modifications (see Table S1-S4 for unmodified models), including removing item 7 (“Agnostics have a very positive influence on relations between social groups”). The modified model fitted well with the data, although in many cases it exceeded recommended cut-off for RMSEA, probably due to low sample sizes (Chen et al., 2008).

Atheistic Narcissism: Measurement Models

We display the results of single-group Confirmatory Factor Analysis for agentic atheistic narcissism in Table 4, and for communal atheistic narcissism in Table 5. The number

of atheists was higher than the number of agnostics in virtually all groups. However, the number of atheists in the countries of Hinduist and Jewish heritage was too low to conduct reliable analyses.

Model fit for agentic atheistic narcissism was well fitted to the data in secular countries and in all of three Christian groups. Model fit for Buddhist and Islamic countries was unacceptable, so we provided additional modifications as we did for agnostics. Modified models were acceptable in all groups (Table 4).

Model fit for communal atheistic narcissism was poor in Buddhist and in Islamic countries. For this reason, we introduced modifications to the initial model. After applying the same modifications as in the agnostic groups, model fit significantly improved, indicating overfit in the atheistic sample from Islamic countries (Table 5). Thus, communal collective could be effectively examined across all groups.

Agentic and Communal Ingroup Enhancement: Cross-Denominational Differences

Prior to exploring cross-group differences in collective narcissism, we conducted measurement invariance analyses to verify scalar invariance across groups. Given the problematic model fit or the low numbers of agnostics and atheists, we excluded non-believers from Hinduist countries. We present the results of Multigroup Confirmatory Factor Analyses in Supplementary Online Materials, Tables S5-S8. We found partial scalar invariance for measures of agentic collective narcissism and scalar invariance for measures of communal collective narcissism; therefore, we were able to compare the scores across groups both among agnostics and atheists (Davidov et al., 2015).

Next, we tested for differences between groups of agnostics and (separately) groups of atheists originating from countries with varying religious heritage. Given the violation of assumptions for multilevel modeling[1] (Nezleck, 2011), we proceeded with one-way Welch's Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The Levene's test revealed violations of homogeneity of

[1] We initially attempted a two-level random-intercepts model to account for group clustering. However, with only seven groups and highly unequal group sizes, the model failed to converge, producing a singular-fit warning (i.e., the estimated variance of the random intercept was effectively zero). This singularity suggests that the data lacked sufficient information to reliably estimate the random-effects variance. Given that multilevel modeling assumes adequate units and observations at each level to support variance estimation, we instead used a one-way Welch's ANOVA.

variances, whereas the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated violation of normality in most groups. We conducted Tukey post-hoc comparisons between groups based on observed scores. Of note, comparisons on latent scores revealed no significant differences. We present the results without controlling for covariates. The results remained virtually the same after including gender, age, and self-reported economic status as covariates Sensitivity analyses indicated that we were able to detect subtler differences (i.e., involving smaller effect sizes) once we analyzed the data from Catholic and Protestant countries; however, samples from Buddhist-dominant and Jewish-dominant countries were seriously underpowered, so the relevant results need to be interpreted with caution (Supplementary Online Materials, Tables S14-S19).

Agentic and Communal Collective Narcissism Among Agnostics from Countries with Varying Religious Heritage

Agnostics from countries of different religious heritage differed in levels of agentic collective narcissism (Figure 1), Welch's ANOVA, $F(6, 192.04) = 12.92$, $p < .001$. The effect size was small-to-moderate, $\eta^2 = .06$, 95% CI [0.04, 1.00]. Post hoc comparisons (Table S16A) indicated that agnostics from secular countries were significantly lower in agentic agnostic narcissism than those from Catholic, Islamic, and Orthodox countries (all ps $\leq .022$). Agnostics from Protestant-dominant countries were significantly lower than those from Catholic, Islamic, and Orthodox countries (all ps $< .001$). Accordingly, we observed the highest levels of agentic agnostic narcissism in Islamic countries, although they significantly differed only from agnostics in secular and Protestant countries (both ps $< .001$). No other comparison was significant.

Levels of communal collective narcissism did not substantially vary across different groups of agnostics (Figure 2). A Welch's ANOVA yielded no significant differences in communal agnostic narcissism across the seven groups, $F(6, 189.59) = 1.93$, $p = .078$, generalized $\eta^2 = .01$, 95% CI [.000, .028].

Agentic and Communal Collective Narcissism Among Atheists from Countries with Varying Religious Heritage

Atheists from countries representing different religious heritage varied in levels of agentic collective narcissism (Figure 3), Welch's ANOVA, $F(5, 377.64) = 31.95$, $p < .001$;

$F(5, 2294) = 30.55$, $p < .001$. The effect size was moderate, $\eta^2 = .06$, 95% CI [0.05, 1.00]. Post hoc comparisons (Table S18A) revealed that atheists from secular and Protestant countries reported the lowest levels of agentic atheistic narcissism, differing significantly from those from Catholic, Buddhist, Islamic, or Orthodox countries (all ps < .001). Atheists from Catholic countries reported lower levels of agentic atheistic narcissism then atheists from Buddhist, Islamic, or Orthodox countries (all ps ≤ .010). Lastly, atheists from Buddhist, Islamic, or Orthodox countries reported higher levels of agentic atheistic narcissism than atheists from secular, Protestant, or Catholic countries (all ps ≤ .010). No other comparison was significant.

Levels of communal collective narcissism also varied across different groups of atheists (Figure 4), Welch's ANOVA, $F(5, 371.53) = 9.52$, $p < .001$. The effect size was small, $\eta^2 = .02$, 95% CI [0.01, 1.00]. As per post hoc comparisons (Table S19A), atheists from secular and Protestant-dominant countries reported lower communal atheistic narcissism than those originating from countries of Islamic or Orthodox heritage (all ps ≤ .003). Atheists from Catholic countries reported lower communal atheistic narcissism than those originating from countries of Islamic ($p < .001$), Orthodox ($p < .001$), or Buddhist ($p = .055$) heritage. Lastly, atheists from Islamic and Orthodox countries reported higher levels of agentic atheistic narcissism than atheists from secular, Protestant, or Catholic countries (all ps ≤ .008). No other comparison was significant. Thus, the pattern was consistent across the two forms of collective narcissism among atheists.

Agentic and Communal Ingroup Enhancement: Agnostics Versus Atheists

The correlations between agentic and communal forms of agnostic and atheistic narcissism were moderate, $r(1181) = .48$, 95% CI [.44, .52], $p < .001$, and $r(2269) = .48$, 95% CI [.45, .51], $p < .001$ respectively. Also, the correlation between latent factors was lower, $\rho = .12$ and $\rho = .16$, respectively.

A paired-samples t-test indicated that agnostics reported higher communal than agentic collective narcissism, $t(1182) = 12.65$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.36, 0.49]. We observed the same pattern among atheists, $t(2270) = 15.56$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.45]. This pattern was

robust across countries of different religious heritage, including secular ones (see Supplementary Online Materials, Tables S13A for agnostics and S13B for atheists).

The difference in agentic collective narcissism between agnostics (M = 3.13) and atheists (M = 3.08) was not statistically significant, Welch's $t(2552.2) = 1.20$, $p = .229$, 95% CI [–0.03, 0.14]. This pattern remained robust across countries of different religious heritage, with the exception for Catholic countries, where agnostics reported higher levels of agentic collective narcissism than atheists (Supplementary Online Materials, Table S14A). Further, agnostics (M = 3.56) reported higher levels of communal collective narcissism than atheists (M = 3.47), $t(2563.6) = 2.25$, $p = .025$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.16]. However, this difference only emerged among non-believers from Catholic countries (Supplementary Online Materials, Table S14B).

Gender Differences

Lastly, we tested for gender differences in collective narcissism levels among atheists and agnostics. We found scalar measurement invariance for both scales between women and men (Supplementary Online Materials, Ancillary Analyses). Therefore, we were able to compare scores across gender groups.

Among agnostics, men reported significantly higher agentic collective narcissism (M = 3.22) than women (M = 3.03), $t(870.2) = 2.53$, $p = .011$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.33]. We observed a similar pattern for communal collective narcissism, with men scoring significantly higher (M = 3.61) than women (M = 3.48), $t(855.6) = 2.04$, $p = .042$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.26]. Both of these patterns, however, were limited to Catholic countries (Supplementary Tables S15A and S15B).

Among atheists, there were no differences in agentic collective narcissism between men (M = 3.04) and women (M = 3.15), $t(1376.3) = –1.87$, $p = .061$, 95% CI [–0.22, 0.01]. Also, we found no significant differences for communal collective narcissism between men (M = 3.47) and women (M = 3.50), $t(1383.2) = –0.57$, $p = .568$, 95% CI [–0.13, 0.07]. These results were robust across atheists from countries of different religious heritage, including secular (Supplementary Tables S15C and 15D).

Discussion

We aimed to examine the phenomenon of collective narcissism among agnostics and atheists originating from all major religions, including secular orientations. We understood collective narcissism as a manifestation of ingroup self-enhancement (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019; Sedikides, 2021). Given the novelty of our investigation, we first needed to determine whether collective narcissism could be effectively measured in these populations using scales established in prior research (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021b). Next, we examined differences in agentic and communal collective narcissism between agnostics and atheists from countries with varying religious heritage (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021b). Previous work indicated substantial differences between agnostics and atheists in terms of their psychological functioning (Karim & Saroglou, 2023), including self-enhancement (Karim & Saroglou, 2025b).

The number of agnostics was too low to reliably test our models in several groups, like Buddhist, Hinduist, and Jewish. As noted earlier, we anticipated that the meanings of agnosticism and atheism would differ from those typically observed in Abrahamic contexts, given that Dharmic religions are less centered on belief in personal god or less institutionalized (Van der Veer, 2001). In the case of Judaism, religion in Israel is closely intertwined with national identity: being Jewish carried both cultural and national connotations, even though national and religious identity are not identical (Cooperman et al., 2016). This overlap may influence how agnosticism and atheism are understood within this context. Despite small sample sizes, model fit was acceptable across all groups except for non-believers from Hindu-majority countries, where such participants were not identified.

The model fit was not optimal, which could be attributed both to the novelty of the construct and the considerably linguistic variability within groups. Nevertheless, we achieved good model fit for agentic and communal collective narcissism among agnostics and atheists. Given that we established at least partial scalar invariance, we proceeded to test hypotheses concerning levels of agentic and communal ingroup enhancement among non-believers from countries representing different religious heritages. Correlations between agentic and communal forms were moderate and comparable across the two non-believer groups, supporting their conceptual distinction. This finding allowed us to examine the relative

prominence of agentic and communal collective narcissism among agnostics and atheists, both globally and within each religious-cultural context.

Individual-level differences suggested that, among agnostics, communal ingroup enhancement was more important than agentic enhancement, whereas atheists exhibited the reverse pattern (Karim & Saroglou, 2023, 2025b). Our findings are congruent with those of Gebauer et al. (2017), confirming that religion is primarily associated with the communal domain. Therefore, both agnostics and atheists seem to be invested in demonstrating ingroup enhancement regarding their morality and prosociality rather than intellectual superiority and potency, regardless of regional religious context.

Comparing agnostics and atheists on ingroup enhancement, agnostics showed stronger communal self-enhancement than atheists, but there were no significant differences for agentic enhancement. This result, though, was culturally limited: agnostics from Catholic countries reported higher agentic and communal collective narcissism than atheists, indicating that the communal domain weights more strongly in agnostics' self-views as kind and prosocial versus atheists' self-views (Karim & Saroglou, 2025b). However, as the referenced study focused on the UK, the cultural specificity of these patterns requires additional examination beyond the Catholic context.

As agentic collective narcissism does not refer directly to intellectual superiority (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009), the absence of substantial differences between agnostics and atheists may be attributed to both measurement issues and the defensiveness of the underlying construct. Agentic collective narcissism can be conceptualized as a defensive orientation more than its communal counterpart, with non-believers possibly endorsing it as a response to perceived threat from dominant religious outgroups (Golec de Zavala, 2024; Karim & Saroglou, 2025a; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021b, 2024). However, the finding of heightened agentic narcissism among agnostics in Catholic countries, relative to atheists, is not readily explained. One possible factor is sample size, as non-believers from Catholic countries comprised the largest group, likely enabling the detection of subtler differences (Supplementary Online Materials, Table S14A). However, the observed pattern was unique to

Catholic and Protestant countries, suggesting that agnostics may adopt different ingroup perspectives depending on religious heritages, an issue that warrants further investigation.

Country-level differences reflecting religious heritage were generally minor, indicating that agnostics and atheists engage in comparable ingroup enhancement across diverse religious contexts. Given that narcissistic identification reflects insecure attachment to the ingroup (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009), we anticipated that non-believers would manifest heightened collective narcissism in highly religious countries, consistent with the religiosity as a social value hypothesis (Gebauer & Sedikides, 2021; Gebauer et al., 2017). In highly religious societies, non-believers may perceive their status as threatened, resulting in stronger narcissistic ingroup enhancement. Owing to modest sample sizes for agnostics and atheists per country, we were unable to conduct multilevel analyses controlling for country-level religiosity. Moreover, agentic collective narcissism, more closely associated with insecurity and lower individual self-esteem than its communal counterpart (Golec de Zavala, 2024; Golec de Zavala et al., 2020; Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2021b, 2024), might be particularly sensitive to country-level social norms, though testing these hypotheses awaits larger samples.

Agnostics and atheists residing in secular countries displayed lower levels of collective narcissism, particularly the agentic form, relative to those living in countries were religion is predominant. Strikingly, participants from Islamic countries manifested the highest collective narcissism levels. This outcome reflects the highly institutionalized and socially influential nature of religiosity in Islamic societies, which are characterized by extensive religious regulation and integration into public life (LeDrew, 2015; Statista, 2021). These results suggest that, for minority groups such as agnostics and atheists, religious-based collective narcissism often functions as a defensive form of collective identity in contextually threatening environments.

Additionally, little-to-no intergroup differences emerged in communal collective narcissism, especially among atheists. This outcome may reflect the domain-specificity of the construct. Prosociality and kindness are emphasized across religious contexts, particularly among agnostics (Karim & Saroglou, 2023). These values may also acquire increased relevance for atheists, given the documented social stigma and perception of immorality or

deviance that atheists frequently encounter within highly religious countries (Gebauer et al., 2017; Karim & Saroglou, 2025a).

Lastly, we obtained no gender differences in agentic and communal form or collective narcissism among agnostic and atheistic, with the exception that, in Catholic countries, male agnostics reported higher narcissism than their female counterparts. Given that previous research has likewise found no gender differences for national collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, 2024), these results indicate that insecure attachment to the group non-believers is driven by social dynamics affecting men and women in a similar way, parallelling general patterns observed for national identity and collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, 2024).

Limitations and Further Directions

Although we were able to explore narcissistic identification among agnostics and atheists worldwide, our investigation has several methodological shortcomings. To begin, we adopted a specific methodology, dividing agnostics and atheists into convictional-based groups instead of linguistic-based or country-based subpopulations. We did so because, as in the case of religious-based identity, the meaning of being agnostic or atheist can substantially vary depending on religious heritage.

Prior work has focused on examining agnostics and atheists within the context of Abrahamic religions (Karim & Saroglou, 2023, 2025a). Christianity, in particular, emphasizes doctrinal belief over practice, whereas many other religions prioritize practice over belief (Bhodi, 2005; Esposito, 2021; Flood, 1996; O'Brien, 2024). Consequently, the psychological implications of identifying as agnostic or atheist can vary considerably across religious contexts. However, we did not explicitly address these cross-religion differences, as we relied solely on participants' self-identification as agnostic or atheist.

There remains a lack of research on collective religious-based narcissism outside Christianity and Islam (Marchlewska et al., 2019; Stopka et al., 2024). Yet, our approach to group classification had limitations. We did not ask our participants about the religious heritage in which they were raised. Instead, we determined classification of agnostics and atheists according to the population's prevailing religion in the participants' country of origin, that is, the religion represented by the largest number of residents within each country. For

example, individuals categorized as Judaism-based agnostics and atheists were from Israel, whereas Catholic-based individuals were drawn from multiple countries, resulting in inconsistent and non-comparable degrees of national homogeneity across groups.

We split Christians into three groups, acknowledging substantial variability in other religious traditions. For instance, we classified members of the Armenian and Ethiopian Church as Orthodox Christians, despite their belonging to the Oriental Orthodox tradition, which is distinct from Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism (Keshishian, 1994). Similarly, we classified Japan as Buddhist country, though Shinto is more culturally prevalent (Statista, 2021). We based this decision on the higher number of Buddhist participants in our sample. Also, we did not distinguish between Sunni and Shia Muslims. These classification decisions introduce additional measurement challenges, notably increasing the likelihood of acceptable model fit in more culturally and linguistically homogenous samples. Moreover, our samples varied in sizes, which resulted in power-related issues. Although samples from Catholic-dominant or Protestant-dominant countries allowed us for detect small effects, samples from other religious traditions were underpowered.

Moreover, our participants were university students, a demographic typically less religious than the general population with regard to the subjective importance of God (Flere & Lavrič, 2008). As such, the social acceptance of non-believers may have been greater among these groups, resulting in a higher representation agnostics and atheists, and less perceived marginalization, compared to the general population. Future research should seek to replicate these findings using more representative, non-student samples with increased age diversity and gender balance. Further, political orientation may also influence individuals' general level of religiosity and their likelihood of identifying as agnostic or atheist, which in turn could indirectly related to collective narcissism among non-believers.

We adapted scales designed to assess collective narcissism in national and religious identity domains (Golec de Zavala, 2024). Given that nascency of empirical research into agnosticism (Lindeman et al., 2020; Karim & Saroglou, 2023), it remains unclear whether agnostics manifest strong ingroup identifications, either secure or narcissistic. Findings herein indicate that agnostics display comparable levels of ingroup enhancement to atheists. Future

research could examine secure ingroup attachment independently and address relations between secure and narcissistic identification. Comparative research on collective narcissism among believers and non-believers, particularly controlling for the relative proportion of these groups in the broader society, is also warranted.

Coda

Our study advances understanding of identity processes among agnostics and atheists, illustrating the capacity for defensive ingroup identity formation in both groups. Further, we found support for applying the agency-communion model of collective narcissism to non-believers. Given its implications for ingroup satisfaction and intergroup relations, examining collective narcissism among agnostics and atheists offers both theoretical and practical relevance. Agnostics, despite their indecisiveness and prosocial orientation, are susceptible to narcissistic ingroup attachment at rates similar to those observed among atheists and believers, with analogous outcomes such as outgroup hostility and conditional prosociality. Therefore, non-believers can exhibit ingroup enhancement across both agentic and communal domains.

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Table 1A

Descriptive Statistics and Reliabilities for Agnostics from Countries with Varying Religious Heritage

Countries	N	% of total sample	% women	Age *M*(*SD*)	SES	CNS *M*(*SD*)	CNS α	CCNI *M*(*SD*)	CCNI α
Buddhist	39	4.10	76.92	21.28 (1.70)	4.33	3.35 (0.91)	.67	3.51 (0.87)	.78
Islamic	57	1.83	36.84	28.35 (10.67)	4.68	3.75 (1.11)	.83	3.94 (1.10)	.90
Jewish	44	13.50	38.64	25.09 (8.67)	5.36	3.20 (1.25)	.87	3.39 (0.99)	.79
Catholic	39	4.10	76.92	21.28 (1.70)	4.33	3.35 (0.91)	.67	3.51 (0.87)	.78
Orthodox	153	5.94	58.17	23.92 (7.10)	4.33	3.24 (1.25)	.86	3.64 (1.08)	.89
Protestant	320	10.52	58.75	25.41 (10.88)	4.36	2.76 (1.14)	.85	3.54 (0.95)	.85
Secular	70	12.30	65.71	25.43 (8.36)	4.77	2.73 (1.11)	.83	3.37 (1.00)	.90
Total*	1227	7.60	58.84	24.29 (8.80)	4.38	3.14 (1.19)	.84	3.56 (1.04)	.88

Note. SES = self-reported economic status of the family. In the case of Hinduism-dominating countries, descriptive statistics are non-informative due to very small sample size.
CNS = Collective Narcissism Scale. CCNI = Communal Collective Inventory. SES = self-reported economic status of the family.
*Total = all agnostics in the study.

Table 1B

Descriptive Statistics and Reliabilities for Atheists from Countries with Varying Religious Heritage

Countries	N	% of total sample	% women	Age *M*(*SD*)	SES	CNS *M*(*SD*)	CNS α	CCNI *M*(*SD*)	CCNI α
Buddhist	101	10.62	45.54	20.87 (2.94)	4.30	3.62 (1.00)	.82	3.71 (0.92)	.85
Islamic	68	2.18	36.76	29.38 (11.25)	4.57	3.79 (1.39)	.86	4.09 (1.16)	.84
Catholic	963	19.28	70.30	22.36 (6.70)	4.40	3.16 (1.27)	.85	3.37 (1.11)	.89
Orthodox	312	12.12	56.41	24.26 (8.65)	4.36	3.48 (1.32)	.86	3.71 (1.18)	.88
Protestant	644	21.16	69.10	24.73 (10.21)	4.49	2.72 (1.18)	.86	3.45 (1.03)	.87
Secular	246	43.23	65.85	26.54 (7.80)	4.71	2.75 (1.12)	.84	3.37 (0.97)	.85
Total*	2343	14.50%	65.56	23.84 (8.40)	4.45	3.08 (1.27)	.86	3.47 (1.09)	.88

Note. In the case of Hinduist and Jewish countries, descriptive statistics are non-informative because of very small sample size.
CNS = Collective Narcissism Scale. CCNI = Communal Collective Inventory. SES = self-reported economic status of the family.
*Total = all atheists in the study.

Table 2

Results for Single-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Collective Narcissism Scale among Agnostics from Countries with Varying Religious Heritage

Countries	N	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR
Buddhist	39	1.000	1.050	.000 [.000, .182]	.057
Catholic	520	.962	.929	.093 [.067, .121]	.032
Islam	56	.929	.867	.134 [.025, .229]	.049
Jewish	42	.938	.883	.140 [.000, .252]	.055
Orthodox	153	1.000	1.006	.000 [.000, .085]	.020
Protestant	308	.999	.998	.018 [.000, .070]	.018
Secular	69	.981	.964	.071 [.000, .168]	.046

Note. Items 2 and 6 were removed. We allowed residual covariances between items 3 and 7 for all groups, and we additionally allowed residuals for items 4 and 8 covary in the sample of agnostics from Buddhists countries.

Table 3

Results for Single-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Communal Collective Narcissism Inventory Among Agnostics from Countries with Varying Religious Heritage

Countries	N	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR
Buddhist	38	.907	.845	.140 [.000, .253]	.066
Catholic	532	.975	.958	.094 [.070, .120]	.023
Islamic	56	.948	.914	.149 [.060, .237]	.043
Jewish	42	.989	.981	.046 [.000, .183]	.056
Orthodox	149	.948	.913	.137 [.090, .187]	.038
Protestant	312	.968	.946	.092 [.060, .127]	.033
Secular	70	.965	.942	.116 [.021, .197]	.038

Note. We removed Item 7.

Table 4

Results of Single-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis for the Collective Narcissism Scale Among Atheists from Countries with Varying Religious Heritage

Countries	N	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR
Buddhist	101	.921	.801	.174 [.105, .249]	.050
Catholic	947	.986	.964	.074 [.052, .097]	.019
Islamic	64	.941	.851	.158 [.063, .257]	.039
Orthodox	304	.998	.994	.031 [.000, .085]	.015
Protestant	635	.983	.958	.082 [.055, .111]	.023
Secular	242	.992	.980	.051 [.000, .106]	.022

Note. We removed items 2 and 6. We allowed for residual covariances between items: 1 and 8, 3 and 7, 5 and 8.

Table 5

Results for Single-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Communal Collective Narcissism Inventory Among Atheists with Varying Religious Heritage

Countries	N	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR
Buddhist	101	.925	.875	.155 [.098, .217]	.054
Catholic	947	.980	.967	.085 [.067, .104]	.022
Islamic	62	1.000	1.008	.000 [.000, .136]	.042
Orthodox	310	.957	.929	.119 [.088, .153]	.034
Protestant	629	.978	.963	.080 [.058, .104]	.026
Secular	241	.954	.923	.109 [.072, .148]	.045

Note. We removed item 7.

Figure 1

Agentic Collective Narcissism Among Agnostics from Countries of Varying Religious Heritage

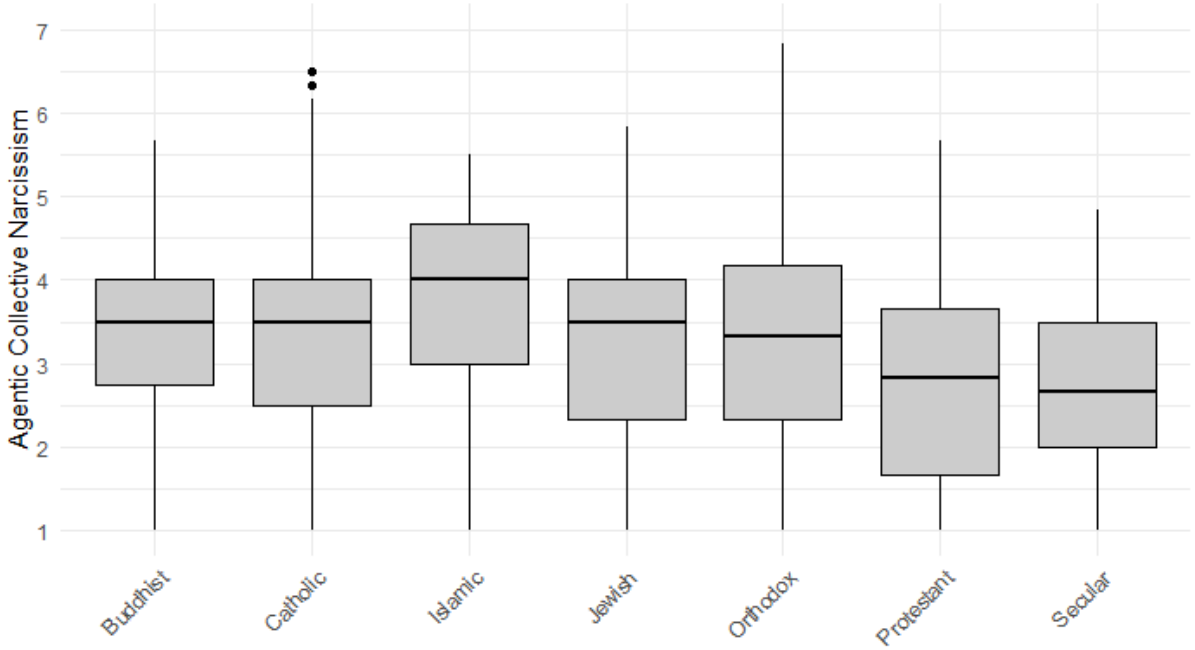

Figure 2

Communal Collective Narcissism Among Agnostics from Countries of Varying Religious Heritage

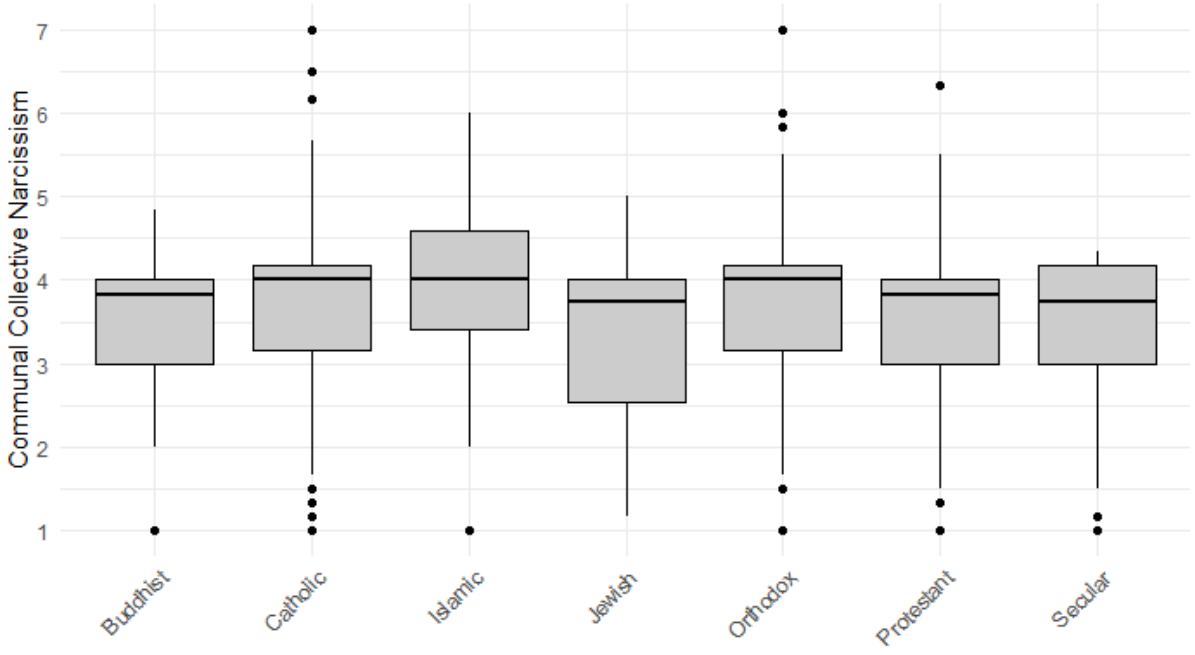

Figure 3

Agentic Collective Narcissism Among Atheists from Countries of Varying Religious Heritage

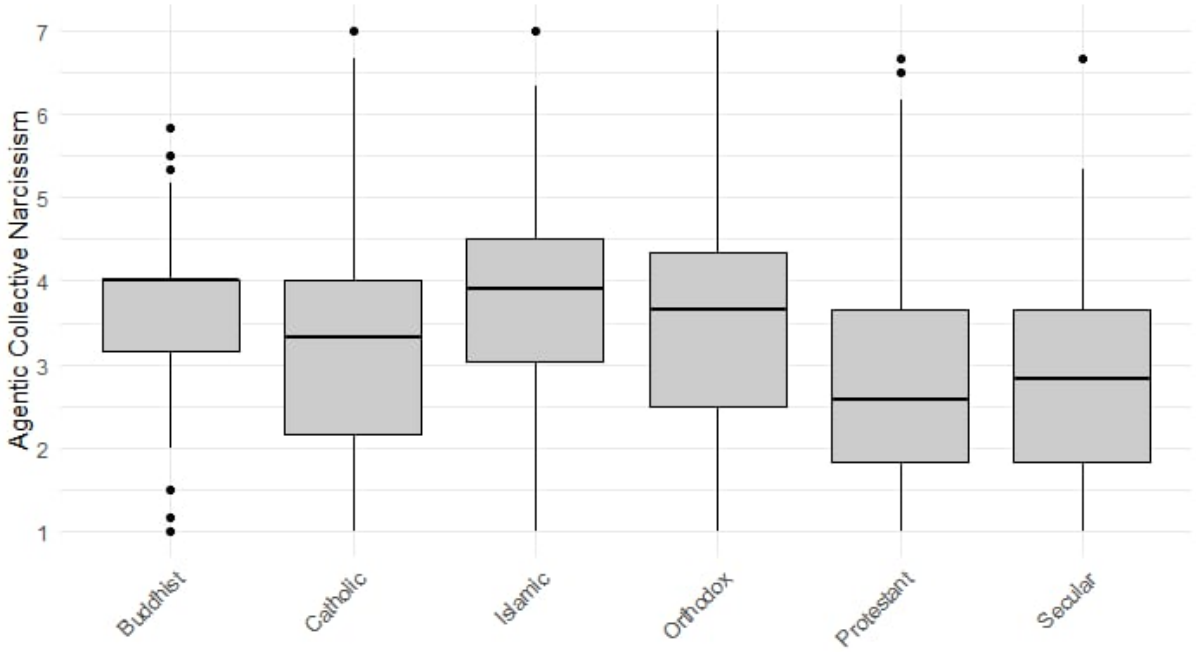

Figure 4

Communal Collective Narcissism Among Atheists from Countries of Varying Religious Heritage